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SECOND-HAND BOOKS

Trade In Them Has An Enduring Prosperity.

THE REVIEWERS' PROFITS

THRIFTY ALLIANCES BETWEEN THEM AND DEALERS.

An American Author Who Has Traveled With the Best of the English—Young Japanese Authoress In America—Author of "Prisoners of Hope."

(Special Correspondence.)

New York, Dec. 10.—I was talking the other day with a man who is pretty familiar with all the mysteries of the second-hand book trade, and he told me what was news to me, and what, I fancy, will be news to the public at large—that the trade in second-hand books is generally profitable, and often profitable by a large per cent. It had rather seemed to me that in the course of years the second-hand book shop had taken on a sadder and more struggling aspect, and as several well-known and almost historic establishments of the kind here in New York had, within the last two or three years, changed hands and undergone a sort of absorption, I was about concluding that here was another once important industry passing out of existence, under the pressure of new commercial conditions. But my authority assures me that this is not at all the case.

The best part of the business is not, however, in the selling of ordinary cloth-bound books. In that one department, I infer, it may have lost ground a little, for ordinary books are now to be had of any dealer at prices so much below what was formerly asked in the first-hand shops, that the inducement to resort to the second-hand dealer is much less. Rare books—such as books out of print and early editions—and books of fine buildings, are the second-hand dealers best commodities. In these the margin of profit is always good, and often it is large. The rare books, of course, he can secure only now and then; but the frequent sales of private libraries—"gentlemen's libraries"—enable him to maintain a fairly constant stock of books in fine bindings. In no business does prosperity depend more on skill and shrewdness in buying. And, indeed, you don't need to go often into a second-hand book shop to discover that the men in the business themselves understand this very well. One who has seemed almost listless and indifferent in the work of selling, may become, if you propose to him to buy, most alert and interested.

While rare books and books in fine bindings are of best promise in the general way, the second-hand dealer has a few chances in the ordinary books that he prizes above anything else in his trade. The best of these is a connection with some periodical that maintains a widely-recognized review department. When the dealer can secure to himself from such a periodical most of the books sent in for review, he considers himself almost a made man; and, I may add, that periodicals now quite often have an agreed-upon relation with the second-hand man and send their "review copies" off to the second-hand shop at a contracted percentage off the list price, the moment they are finished with them. Thus, the tender young poet, whose own relation to these things is so beautifully remote from anything commercial, may, if he will take to his soul the added agony that the reviewer who cuts him up so ruthlessly has the hardihood, after pronouncing his book of no account, to carry it out and sell it.

We are apt to think of English authors as great men to run about, and American authors as great men to stay at home. But, after all, this is one of the many reflections that the facts, when we come to examine them, hardly justify. I had this brought home to me a few days ago, in looking over Mr. Hezekiah Butterworth's new book on South America. We don't especially think of Mr. Butterworth as a great American traveler. When his name is mentioned we first think of him as the author of New England stories—stories that he had not to go from home to get his material for; and next we think of him as the man who for twenty-five years or more had an editorial connection with the Youth's Companion that must have been more or less confining. But, after all, he has been a diligent and far traveler, and his journeys have supplied the matter of many of his books. Pretty nearly all parts of the western hemisphere, except the tips, and no small section of the eastern have, at one time and another, come under his eye. But, in spite of it all, Mr. Butterworth is pretty exclusively a man of New England. He was born in Rhode Island in 1839; he removed rather early in life to Boston, and there he has had his home ever since. Even the gravitation of the literary center from Boston to New York (if it has gravitated—I have no desire to be dogmatic on that point), added to his fondness for travel, has not persuaded him to a change of residence.

A much-advertised title just now is that of "The Prisoners of Hope." It is borne by a novel recently published in England, a novel of contemporary life; and it is borne by a novel published in this country, a novel of Virginia colonial life; and between the two, if you follow reviews and publishers' announcements with any closeness, you become pretty familiar with it in time. For myself, I never see it without thinking of Anthony Hope and the "Prisoner of Zenda," and I have wondered whether in the minds of the two ladies who have chosen it for their respective creations this previous association of the words "Hope" and "Prisoner" had not had an influence.

The American "Prisoners of Hope" is proving a distinct success. Everybody agrees that in it, Miss Mary Johnson, the author, makes her first appearance before the public with unquestionable distinction. She writes, if not of her own time, at least of her dear, native land, in writing of Virginia. She lives there now, and she has lived there most of her life; but for quite a while she had her home here in New York. Her father, a descendant of one of the old Virginia families, was active here in large business enterprises, but he suffered reverses finally; and then it was that the family returned to Virginia. Miss Johnson has always been, I understand, of a bookish inclination, with a settled indifference to social diversions; and it is no surprise to her friends that she should have taken to writing, nor, indeed, that even her first book should be a notable one.

A young Japanese woman, writing successful stories of Japanese life in very good English, may, I think, pass for something of a literary novelty. Such a young woman we have among us in Miss Onoto Watanna. She has already published stories in well-known periodicals, and she is announced to publish others during the coming year. How much English Miss Watanna knew before she came here, I don't know; but her own account of herself is that she has had "very little school education," and she has been in this country only something over a year. In a few weeks she expects to bring out an English book. She is still young—only 25—and as she adds to literary tact the instinct of address, I don't see why she should not have a prosperous career. At present she is living at Chicago.

Few men have devoted themselves to literary pursuits with more energy and constancy than Mr. Rossiter Johnson, who placed the reading public under a special debt of gratitude twenty years ago, when he originated the idea of a collection of the best short stories written in English, and carried it out so acceptably in the series of handy, low-priced volumes entitled "Little Classics." The work had a novelty then that it would not have now, for since then—largely, no doubt, because of the success of Mr. Johnson's project—such series have become as common as "bargain" gloves and neckwear. It has been largely in compilation and editing that Mr. Johnson's talents have been employed. In work of this kind there is never much of general fame, and yet only a man of rare equipment can do it capably. At first he was a newspaper editor, beginning the work in his native town of Rochester, N. Y., and continuing it at Concord, N. H. But at 33, or a little past, he became associated with George Ripley and Charles A. Dana in editing the new edition of the "American Cyclopedia," and has held a connection with that publication ever since, having been since 1882 the editor of the "Annual," which is issued at the end of each year as a kind of appendix to the cyclopedia proper. Then he has edited no end of other books and series; and if a list were made of all the important works he has had a share in producing it would be a long one, and would testify to a degree of industry and a range and care of investigation of which any man might well be proud. But even all this has not fully occupied Mr. Johnson. He has, in addition, written several histories, and two or three long stories for young people. His "Phaeton Rogers" everybody knows. And, even with these, his time, apparently, was still not all gone, for he is the secretary of the executive council of the Author's club, and is the man especially charged with attending to the business and affairs of that organization. There seems to me to be a special fitness in this last relation of Mr. Johnson, apart from any consideration of the skill with which he undoubtedly discharges it. He represents in himself what one may call the two grand divisions of literary work—first, that of investigating, gathering and sifting, and, second, that of pure composition—and, therefore, in an association of literary men he is most naturally the man to be looked at from all sides to keep the thing together and moving.

The fact of the payment of $27,500 for a controlling interest in the English Saturday Review has several points of interest. The Saturday Review has changed hands several times within a few years, and, in addition, it has given signs in its pages of finding the tide rather set against it and of wanting, and not quite knowing how, to recover its old place in the "swim." Moreover, it has as property nothing but sheer "good will." It has no valuable press franchises, like many a newspaper, and no exclusive hold on a circle of popular authors, like some of the magazines, and it has no mechanical equipment. The purchaser simply buys a name—a trade mark. This name, it is true, has been well before the English public for upward of forty years, and under its earlier editors the Review was highly prosperous. But in the clear uncertainty of the position it has held latterly, the size of the purchase price in the last sale would seem to be indicative rather of the wealth of the buyer than of the real commercial excellence of the property. The man of money, who craves the distinction of connection with a periodical is not an unfamiliar type even among us, and there has been good reason to believe that he was a yet more familiar type in England. In neither country, however, is he quite numerous enough to go round. There are still in both lands a few embarrassed editors and publishers who would like to find some one on whom they could unload—at least, I suspect that there are.

The fact that Dr. Samuel Smiles has lately rallied from an illness which all his friends felt that he could not survive, shows from what a good personal endowment of tenacity he wrote those books which have made him peculiarly the prophet of resolute living. In a few days now he will be 86 years old. He lives in London, and his manner of life is very quiet and domestic. He had already had a long and varied experience of life before he undertook to become the guide of others by writing his famous book, "Self-Help." Educated for a surgeon, he practiced that profession for some years, then became editor of a newspaper at Leeds, and then the secretary of a railroad company. It was when he was 46 or 47 years old, and after he had been a railroad manager for four or five years, that he wrote "Self-Help." Like many another successful book, it had to beg at first for a publisher. Within a year 20,000 copies of it were sold; and literally hundreds of thousands of copies have been sold since, and it has been translated into something like twenty languages. Since Dr. Smiles furnished the model any number of writers have tried to repeat his achievement with books of practical advice on the conduct of life, enlivened by anecdotes from eminent biography, but none of them has really succeeded. "Self-Help" stands alone, there is no second of its kind.

E. C. MARTIN.